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STRATEGIC TARGETING BY SOVIET SSBNs

by

JAMES JOHN TRITTEN

MAY 1988

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Prepared for:
Director, Net Assessment
Office of the Secretary of Defense
Washington, D.C. 20301

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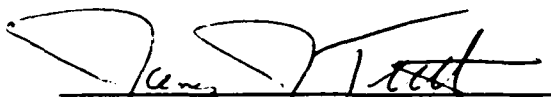
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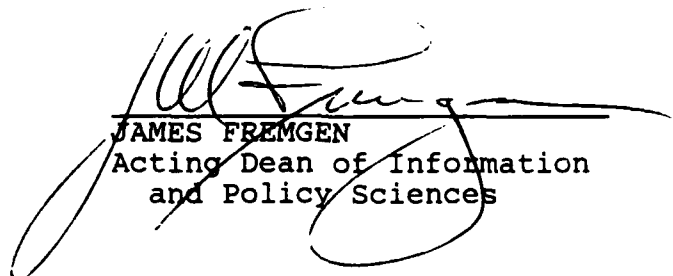
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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED			1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY OF REPORT		
2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE					
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) NPS-56-88-011			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION Naval Postgraduate School	6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) Code 56		7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION		
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Monterey, CA 93943-5100			7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		
8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION Director, Net Assessment	8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) OSD/NA		9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER MIPR # DWAM70105		
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Office of the Secretary of Defense Washington, D.C. 20301			10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) STRATEGIC TARGETING BY SOVIET SSBNs					
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) James J. Tritten					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT FINAL REPORT	13b. TIME COVERED FROM DEC 87 TO MAY 88		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 16 MAY 1988		15. PAGE COUNT 13
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION Edited version to appear in <u>Naval Forces</u> in 1988					
17. COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP	Soviet Navy SLBM Deterrence		
			War SSBN Nuclear Warfare		
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)					
Examination of declaratory targeting by Soviet Navy strategic missiles carried aboard submarines on forward deployment and in bastions. Role of Soviet Navy in strategic nuclear reserve. Assessment of Soviet acceptance of mutual assured destruction (MAD).					
20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED		
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL JAMES J. TRITTEN, CHAIRMAN, NSA			22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) (408) 646-2521/2949		22c. OFFICE SYMBOL Code 56Tr



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STRATEGIC TARGETING BY SOVIET SSBNS
by
James J. Tritten

An examination of plans for the Soviet Union to use its sea-based strategic nuclear missiles in the event of a war should enable us to more fully understand the Politburo's concept of deterrence, military doctrine, and military strategy. Having this knowledge, Western defense programs can be better designed, strategies for deterring and, if necessary, fighting a war can be enhanced, and arms control positions rationally determined.

Unfortunately, the West does not have access to the exact war and other contingency plans of the Soviet Union nor to the sealed instructions of the commanding officers of Soviet ballistic missile nuclear powered submarines (SSBNs). In order to get at the issues, therefore, one must look at what the Soviets tell us (and themselves) in their literature, the capabilities of their forces, and deployment and exercise behavior. In doing so, we probably can get a fair idea of what the Soviet plans are. At best, however, our conclusions will be speculative unless there is complementary evidence in each of these three categories.¹

To follow the logic of Soviet military doctrine and strategy and then address SSBN targeting, one must first look at literature evidence that discusses what it is that the USSR hopes to achieve if it were to engage in war fighting. According to the Soviet military literature, the overall political-military or major theater goals of war are termed "strategic goals." The

military's role in war is to conduct the armed conflict portion of the war, only a portion of the overall war effort, and to attain assigned strategic goals. If these goals are achieved, then "victory" at that level of warfare is possible.

Strategic goals to be attained by the Soviet Navy include: (1) crushing an enemy's military-economic potential, and (2) shattering enemy nuclear sea power. These actually compare quite favorably with the goals which Soviet land-based intercontinental range nuclear ballistic missile forces (ICBMs) are supposed to be able to attain; (1) the undermining of an enemy's military and economic potential, (2) the annihilation of an enemy's means of strategic nuclear attack, and (3) the destruction of main enemy military groupings.

Strategic goals are accomplished by the military in armed conflict by performing strategic missions. The strategic missions of all of the Soviet military services include (1) strikes by strategic nuclear forces, (2) strategic operations in the continental theater, (3) strategic operations in oceanic theaters, and (4) operations to repulse and defend the nation from enemy strikes.

Recent Commanders-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy have described the Soviet Navy as having a role in the overall strategic missions of strikes by strategic nuclear forces, defense of the homeland, and obviously strategic operations in oceanic theaters. Homeland defense and strategic operations in oceanic theater were discussed by me in a previous technical report.² This report

will examine the Soviet Navy's role in conducting strikes with its strategic nuclear forces. It is important, however, to remember that not all Soviet "strategic" operations involve nuclear weapons and that nuclear operations will not be conducted by the Navy alone; i.e. naval forces are but one element in the triad of Soviet strategic nuclear delivery vehicles that includes ballistic missiles and air-breathing forces.

Fleet Admiral of the Soviet Union Sergei Gorshkov has written that the primary mission of the Soviet Navy, indeed of fleets in general, is to conduct operations against the shore. The major strategic goal relative to such operations that can be achieved by the Navy is to conduct strikes which will crush the enemy's military-economic potential. Such strikes have the ability to influence the outcome of a war.

According to the former Navy Commander-in-Chief, strikes against the shore conducted by the Soviet fleet or specifically by Soviet SSBNs will be directed against enemy military bases (especially those that constitute a springboard for attacks against the USSR), military-industrial targets, political-administrative centers, and the terminals for the sea lines of communication.

There is one type of target not appearing on this list that bears further investigation by considering deployment patterns, exercise behavior, and hardware capabilities; notably cities. Many spokesmen in the West assume that, if a nuclear war were to be fought, each side would target the opponent's cities. The

United States rejects targeting cities and, from the Soviet open-source literature, it appears that they do not include them in their list of "declaratory" targets; those that they openly communicate to the enemy in order to support deterrence.

By considering deployment patterns and hardware evidence, targeting by SSBNs appears to be broken down into two major categories: (1) targeting by exposed units on forward deployment, and (2) by units more firmly protected within "bastions." Prevention of strikes, especially nuclear strikes, by an enemy against the USSR is a frequent theme in the Soviet literature. Forward deployed submarines with medium-range (shorter flight time) missiles are well suited for strikes against bases that constitute springboards for attack against the USSR.

Frustration of enemy attacks against the homeland is a major mission of all the Soviet military services and would serve to limit damage to the USSR. Prime examples of such strikes would be the use of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with short flight times against Western bomber and tanker bases or to disrupt command, control, communications and intelligence (C³I) and thus sever the links to U.S./NATO retaliatory forces.

Surprise and the taking of decisive actions in the initial stages of a war are frequent themes in the Soviet literature. This, coupled with the continued out of bastion deployment of Soviet SSBNs with shorter flight time missiles, tends to support the conclusion that forward deployed units will be used immediately once the war enters its nuclear phase. Forward

deployed units can strike time-urgent enemy targets in about half the time of a land-based ballistic missile. An attack by naval missiles instead of those assigned to the Strategic Rocket Forces might have the advantage of catching enemy bombers and tankers still on the runway.

The Soviet Navy keeps some of its older SSBNs and diesel-electric ballistic missile submarines (SSBs) deployed in its home waters. Those submarines carrying medium-range SLBMs might either be used for theater strikes against time-urgent targets or they might be withheld for use later against an intercontinental enemy.

If the latter choice were to be exercised, a "surge" deployment of submarines out of the bastions would occur. Analysts have speculated that this surge might occur during the initial conventional stage of a war, thus providing a "signal" to the West or, alternatively, the surge might occur following initial nuclear strikes and thus serve to threaten follow-on attacks.

The evidence from the open source literature tells us that SLBM targets can either be time-urgent or fitting the role of a strategic nuclear reserve. The continued, indeed recently enhanced,³ deployment of SSB/SSBNs with medium-range missiles in home waters where they can directly support the Soviet combined arms campaign in the theater tends to uphold the finding that they have a theater role. The Soviet Navy would make direct

contributions to the war ashore in the theater of military operations that seems to preoccupy the Soviet military mind.

The net contribution that these submarines could make on the total nuclear strikes against an intercontinental enemy is a mere drop in the bucket if one factors in the vast numbers of ICBMs and other systems already available to the USSR. Another complication for the Soviet military is that if these submarines were to sail through the gauntlet of enemy antisubmarine forces facing them, their arrival off the shores within missile range of an intercontinental enemy is by no means assured. For these reasons, it is more likely that these older SSB/SSBNs with medium-range missiles have a theater instead of an intercontinental role.

Obviously no one, even the Soviets, knows what would actually occur in a real war. Declaratory statements made before a war are, in part, communications between adversaries designed to support deterrence. Actual war planning that goes on inside the Soviet military need not necessarily parallel statements made in the open literature. Finally, when nations actually implement war plans because they find themselves in an armed conflict, war planning need not guide the actual execution of military operations.

Soviet SSBNs with long-range SLBMs deployed in the bastion require approximately the same flight time for their missiles to strike an intercontinental target as do land-based missiles. This poses a choice for the Soviet military: to either use them

during initial nuclear strikes or to withhold them and threaten strikes later. Again, the literature evidence can support either case.

By looking at literature discussions of all Soviet nuclear forces, it is evident that the Russian military leadership does not take as a given the survivability and mission completion of its land-based and air-breathing nuclear forces. The one attribute that SSBNs in their protected bastions have is relative security and therefore ability to strike the enemy at any stage of a future war. This relative advantage may change over time as the USSR continues to deploy mobile land-based systems.

The Soviet Navy thus appears to have a major but not unique role in the strategic nuclear reserve. Such reserve forces could threaten additional nuclear strikes and thus serve to influence the conduct of campaigns, decisions to escalate vertically, and war termination. As the number of hard-target kill warheads carried by the Soviet Navy increases, it is likely that the number of warheads assigned to first-strikes will also increase.

Literature evidence does not support a finding that Soviet SLBMs would be used to target enemy cities. The hardware evidence also refutes this as well; over the years, Soviet SLBMs have had their accuracy increased and their nuclear yields decreased. Increasing accuracy alone can be explained by a desire to increase damage against harder targets. Decreasing yields can be explained by a desire to either decrease payload weight in order to carry more internal mechanisms/fuel or to

decrease collateral damage. Given the rejection of targeting civilians in the literature, it would appear that the latter is more likely the case, i.e. Soviet SLBMs are not maximized for wide scale destruction of non-combatants in cities.

Targeting naval forces at sea with ballistic missiles is a possibility that has appeared in the Soviet literature. When he was Minister of Defense, Marshal of the Soviet Union Andrey Grecko specifically discussed the use of land-based systems to strike naval forces in the theater. This theme has not resurfaced in the literature of late. The issue remains unresolved since obviously any ballistic missile could be actually used against naval forces that have been located.

By considering the above likely Soviet SSBN targeting, we are justified in reaching certain conclusions about Soviet military strategy and doctrine. Perhaps one of the most important of these conclusions is that there is little evidence that the USSR accepts the mutual assured destruction (MAD) school of deterrence.

By deploying offensive nuclear forces that would be used in first strikes to limit damage to the homeland, the Soviet Union is saying to us that it intends to deter war by having the capability to fight one. Short flight time SLBMs on forward deployed submarines striking Western bomber/tanker bases and disrupting allied C³I are not weapons that are consistent with leaving oneself open to nuclear attack, a condition assumed in MAD theory. If the USSR had accepted MAD, it would be more

logical for them to have only developed long-range SLBMs for use on submarines deployed in heavily protected bastions.

The Soviet preference for attacking Western nuclear assets during the conventional phase of a war before they can be used against the USSR also undermines any argument that they have accepted MAD. Therefore, rather than having the capability to punish aggression, the Soviet method of deterrence is to have the capability of defeating attacks and attempting to successfully conclude campaigns on favorable terms.

In turn, we should then conclude that the Soviet Navy is not a defensive Navy. It is maximized for operations against NATO and especially the United States. To term the Soviet Navy as "defensive" is to accept their logic that preemptive first nuclear strikes conducted to limit damage to the homeland are "defensive."

Soviet SSBNs have allowed the Politburo to make some important statements. First, by deploying SSBNs, the USSR was able to demonstrate technological competence which one might argue is becoming technological parity. Second, when land-based nuclear weapons were identified for reduction in Europe, the Soviet Navy was able to provide alternative coverage. Finally, the Soviet Union has obviously given priority to solving its problems with the U.S. and NATO. Their fleet is maximized for operations against the alliance and therefore is not maximized for operations in the Third World.

The more that NATO does to stress the Soviet Navy, the more likely it is that the Soviet Union will remain preoccupied with that threat and less likely that it will resort to overseas adventurism. The recent INF agreement may result in moving additional Soviet nuclear assets to sea, a move that will not only be more costly but make more nuclear assets vulnerable during the conventional phase of war. This, in turn, will reinforce the need for bastion defense and reduce surplus assets available for missions elsewhere.

NATO and the U.S. are beginning to take such competitive strategies seriously. Deterrence of war and especially nuclear war is a very complex matter that should not rest on the good will and cooperation of potential adversaries. The West will have to not only procure the weapons systems that it will need to fight possible campaigns but it will need to continue to try and shape Soviet military decision making to result in less threatening capabilities. Doing so should upset Soviet cost/benefit calculations, thereby enhancing deterrence, and also result in better alliance capabilities to do something that matters in the event that deterrence were to fail.

Looking at the Soviet model gives those of us interested in naval matters cause to admire the efforts of Fleet Admiral Gorshkov over the years. In order to justify his fleet to the marshals and land-oriented party leaders, Gorshkov had to be quite clever in explaining how this fleet could affect what happens ashore. Admiral Gorshkov's efforts appear to have been a successful strategy. Perhaps we have something to learn.

NOTES

1. For an additional description of methodology and full citations for all evidence, see my Soviet Naval Forces and Nuclear Warfare: Weapons, Employment, and Policy, Boulder, Colorado & London: Westview Press, 1986.
2. "Withholding & Attacking SSBNs" NPS-56-88-004, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School Technical Report, February 1988, 21 pp.
3. The Director of Naval Intelligence recently reported that Yankee SSBNs were no longer on deployment off the Atlantic coast of the U.S. having been diverted instead to European waters. See statement of Rear Admiral William O. Studeman USN before the House Armed Services Seapower and Strategic and Critical Materials Sub-committee on 1 March 1988, p. 22.

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